DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 086 025 FL 004 942

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TITLE A Language Teaching Strategy for Listening Comprehension.
PUB DATE 12 May 73
NOTE 5p.; Paper presented at the Annual Conference of Teachers of English to Speakers of Other Languages (7th, San Juan, Puerto Rico, May 12, 1973)

EDRS PRICE MF-$0.65 HC-$3.29
DESCRIPTORS Communication (Thought Transfer); Comprehension Development; Educational Strategies; Experimental Groups; *Kinesthetic Methods; Kinesthetic Perception; Language Instruction; *Listening Comprehension; Listening Habits; *Motivation Techniques; *Retention Studies; *Second Language Learning; Student Attitudes; Student Motivation; Teaching Techniques; Translation

ABSTRACT

A study of listening comprehension skills in foreign language classes compared the level of retention achieved by students trained to listen and perform versus students trained to listen and observe. Physical movement during training was not shown to be a critical factor in achievement. However, the experiment revealed a significant difference in student attitudes toward the techniques, indicating that motivation is weak when students learn in an inert way; it is preferable to have them make a physical response to the foreign commands. In addition, the inactive observers engaged in a significantly higher amount of silent translation during the training than students in motion, who make direct associations between the acoustic image and its meaning. A total physical response approach in order to develop listening fluency has proved very effective. However, there are some hurdles in the use of this technique in regular classroom situations where it might be difficult for fifteen or more students to move simultaneously around the room, or where people of different cultures feel reluctant and uncomfortable doing so. (Author/HW)

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A Language Teaching Strategy for Listening Comprehension

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Both the audio-lingual and the cognitive code methods place listening comprehension at the top in the hierarchy of skills to be acquired by the foreign language learner, and any method that attempts to teach speech behavior will have to emphasize the listening skill first, for, without perception (some order and regularity in the noise of the stream of speech) and recognition (familiarity in decoding the crucial elements which determine the message) at the hearing level, the students will have a hard time indeed in reaching the imitation and reproduction phases at the speech level.

Despite the fact that listening comprehension has long been recognized as of prime importance for the acquisition of speech, most foreign language programs have neglected it as a skill in its own right. It has generally been treated as incidental to speaking rather than as a foundation for it.

Harold E. Palmer[1] writing in 1925, suggested the use of imperative drills as an interesting and profitable activity for raw beginners in a foreign language. He based his advice on the observation that the young child when learning his native language is able to obey verbal stimuli physically long before he is able to articulate any coherent intelligible speech material. Palmer then concluded that for foreign language learners also the execution of orders is a prerequisite to the acquisition of powers of expression. Yet he instructed the teacher to direct the student in the carrying out of the commands by means of gestures and hand signs rather than by unmistakably modeling the physical action for the student to imitate it. Palmer apparently was not aware of the fact that this kind of motor learning resisted extinction, for he stated that when a given command is repeated after the lapse of some minutes or days it will be necessary to reintroduce the gestures, although the general tendency should always be toward the elimination of signals.

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[1]Harold E. Palmer, English Through Actions (London: Longmans, Green, and Company, 1959)

It is only recently[2] that empirical evidence has been given of how listening fluency can be achieved with a technique which approximates one-trial learning. This technique, called the Total Physical Response, consists of having the students listen to commands in the foreign language. When they hear each utterance they do exactly what the instructor does, i.e., act out the order. The students are instructed to be silent during training. The results of the pilot studies conducted by Asher demonstrated that students had unusually long-term retention for Japanese when they listened to the commands and were required to make a total physical response.[3] Moreover, acting out versus merely observing during training did not seem to operate differentially on retention, provided the observant students were also required to act out the commands during the retention tests.

We have been using this technique in Spanish language programs for the last four years, and the results obtained were more encouraging than in programs where this approach had not been used: The students showed higher retention, less frustration, and consequently higher motivation.

However, there are some hurdles in the use of this technique in regular classroom situations. In classes of fifteen or more students it is difficult for them to move simultaneously around the room. Besides, English as a second language teachers trained in the use of this audio-motor approach have reported that peoples from other cultures felt very reluctant and uncomfortable about moving during the lessons. These teachers' observations are confirmed by Edward Hall,[4] who states that the American culture stresses learning by doing while some other cultures learn by demonstration but without the teacher requiring the student to do anything himself while learning.

The question, then, is whether physical response is essential during the learning period or whether inactive observers can achieve as much retention without performing along with the instructor.

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[2] James J. Asher, "Towards a Neo-Field Theory of Behavior." Journal of Humanistic Psychology, IV, No. 2 (Fall, 1964).

[3] James J. Asher, "The Learning Strategy of the Total Physical Response: A Review," The Modern Language Journal, L, No. 12 (February, 1966).

[4] Edward Hall, The Silent Language (Fawcet Publications, Inc., 1969), page 53.

If, as Asher has concluded, physical response is not essential during training, the technique could be used for instruction in large classes and to audiences through such media as TV, slide or filmstrip-tape presentations, with the students observing the instructor perform the commands in the target language.

It is for this reason that we decided to measure the level of retention achieved by high school students trained in listening comprehension of Hebrew using the total physical response technique and find out whether physical response to the foreign utterances is essential during the training period or whether students who only listen and observe can achieve as much retention as the subjects in motion.

Since attitude plays a very important part in any kind of learning, does the attitude of the group which is in motion differ from that of the group which only observes? Also in foreign language learning, distinctiveness of the two language systems, native and foreign, is important. Which approach, then, students' motor responses or students' observation, will stimulate the students to relate acoustic symbols directly with an environmental event rather than indirectly through the association of the equivalent symbol of the native language?

In the preparation of the language units to be used during the training period, we decided to follow a pattern similar to that used in the Total Physical Response Materials developed for the program in Spanish. Units for Total Physical Response (TPR) materials are constructed with two considerations in mind:

1. Introduction of vocabulary, for example nouns, verbs, adjectives, adverbs, prepostions, under headings such as "the family", "occupations or professions", "classroom activities", "colors". Obviously, the units can include only vocabulary that lends itself to acting out.
2. Introduction of as many transformations as the limitations of the command structure afford. It should be noticed that a command is a transform of a basic sentence pattern; thus a TPR approach to language learning has to rule out a structured grammatical sequence that starts with the introduction of basic sentence patterns. It should also be borne in mind that since the TPR approach is restricted to those structures that can be behaviorized, it will not admit the transformation with <u>not</u> in a simple imperative sentence like "Don't touch the book." If one wanted to introduce the negative, one would have to

embed it not in the imperative structure, but in a structure that follows it, for example: "Touch the book that is not on the floor."

Each unit of the TPR used in this study has five to six utterances. Only one slot in the grammatical structure of the series of utterances that make up a unit changes; thus the student can discriminate between the different parts of speech in each utterance. If the focus of the unit is on recognition of nouns, only the noun slot will change, whereas the verb will remain constant. For example, Unit I contains the following commands: (in translation)

Touch the book.
" " pencil.
" " envelope.
" " floor.
" " table.
" " chair.

The experimental group (subjects in motion) and the control group (inactive observers) were given a pretest, language training, four sessions of fifteen minutes each during four consecutive days; an attitudinal questionnaire and a retention test administered (a) seventy two hours and (b) three weeks after the end of training. The results of this study disclosed that physical movement during training was not a critical factor in achievement. Although the level of retention achieved by the subjects in motion for all types of utterances was higher than that achieved by the inactive observers, the difference between the two groups was not significant.

However, the fact that (a) more students in the motion group were associated with positive affect towards the technique and (b) the inactive observers group suffered attrition, may indicate that motivation is weak when the students learn in an inert way, and that it is preferable to have them make a physical response to the foreign commands.

Physical movement during training helped the students to make direct associations between the acoustic image and its meaning. The results showed that the inactive observers engaged in a significantly higher amount of translation than the subjects in motion.

The results of this study suggest other research problems:

It is not known yet whether or not there is a relationship between the amount of physical involvement and the amount of retention. A comparison between retention of pairs of utterances like the following might yield an answer to this question. The underline indicates the focus of the utterance.

a.	Touch number five	Write number five
b.	Pick up a book	Draw a book
c.	Give me a glass of water	Pour a glass of water for me
d.	Bring me the blue picture	Paint the picture blue

The results of such a study would yield valuable information for writers of TPR materials.

Also, research is needed to find out the retention and motivation of students toward this technique when delivered through films, slides, or filmstrips. The results might not be the same as when it is done live.